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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3438
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3643
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000148

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR I/O PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/04/2018
TAGS: PREL PGOV LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MICHEL MURR ON THE INDEPENDENTS

REF: A. BEIRUT 140
     ¶B. BEIRUT 124

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a February 4 meeting, MP and self-styled
independent list kingmaker Michel Murr told the Ambassador
that he, and not his son, Defense Minister Elias Murr, would
run for a seat in the Metn district in the June parliamentary
elections. Murr appeared confident about his list's chances
in the Metn, and said he was doing a better job of reaching
out to the community and providing services than opponents
from Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). He assured
the Ambassador that he would not "give his seats" to Aoun,
and denied that Elias' comments this week defending Aoun's
son-in-law, Telecom Minister Gebran Bassil, which some had
suggested demonstrated a Murr/Aoun alliance. In
contradiction to most other forecasts, he projected victory
for up to 14 independents across Lebanon in the elections.
End summary.

"I WILL BE THE CANDIDATE"

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by EconOff and Senior LES
Political Advisor, called on Greek Orthodox MP Michel Murr at
his office in Zalka February 4. Murr announced that he would
run in the June 7 parliamentary elections in the Metn, and
confirmed that his son, Elias, wanted to concentrate on his
ministerial portfolio at the Ministry of Defense and would
not run. (Note: Murr made a press announcement to this
effect immediately following the meeting. End note.) Murr
criticized FPM's Michel Aoun for his recent attacks on
centrist candidates, and declared defiantly, "Aoun can scream
all he wants, but we independents will move forward."

¶3. (C) Murr was confident about his electoral list for the
Metn, which he said would include four independents
(including himself), one Tashnaq Armenian (likely Hagop
Pakradounian), and Sami Gemayel (son of Kataeb leader Amine
Gemayel), leaving two seats open, one for March 14's Nassib
Lahoud (who could not be included in the Murr list, lest it
be tainted with two March 14 names), and one for someone
else. Murr said he was pouring a massive amount of time and
money into the district, much more than his FPM opponents.

"WHY HELP AOUN WHEN
I CAN WIN ON MY OWN?"

¶4. (C) Murr stressed he would not strike a deal with Aoun and
"give up" the 7-8 seats he believed his candidates could win.
 He compared himself to Marada Party leader Suleiman
Franjieh, who likewise will not place his candidates on
Aoun's list in Zgharta, though he allies with him
politically. "Why should I help Aoun when I can win on my
own?" said Murr. He said PM Siniora had asked Elias about
the content of Elias' meeting with Syrian President Bashar
Asad during Elias' January 28 official visit to Damascus.
According to Michel Murr, his son responded to Asad's
question on a possible Aoun-Murr electoral agreement by
saying, "I think that will be impossible for my father."
Michel Murr was emphatic, jesting: "I will not give my seats
to anyone... except Obama, and then only if he finds a
solution to the Arab-Palestinian conflict."

¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked Murr about his son's defense of
Michel Aoun's son-in-law, Telecommunications Minister Gebran
Bassil, in the controversy over Bassil's enforcement of a
wire-tapping law (Ref A). She noted that many were
speculating the younger Murr's defense of Bassil suggested
there had been a deal between the Murrs and Aoun. Murr said
he planned to address this issue publicly and put to rest
rumors of a deal. Elias Murr, explained his father, was
acting in his role as defense minister, and had spoken
"honestly" about the need to enforce the wire-tapping law;

BEIRUT 00000148 002 OF 002

his defense of Bassil was not political. Meanwhile, said
Michel Murr, "I am the candidate," and make local electoral
decisions.

¶6. (C) Murr stressed his continuing contacts with March 14
leaders, including weekly meetings with Future Movement
leader Saad Hariri (held late at night, since Murr said he
does not circulate during daylight hours for security
reasons). He sounded convinced that he and other independent
candidates could win seats in Beirut, Zahle, and Baabda, as
well as in the Metn, taking as many as 14 seats in the
128-seat parliament.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Murr's estimates of the number of seats his candidates
could win in the Metn, as well as the number of independents
who might be elected nationwide, are far higher than what
pollsters predict. In a February 4 presentation to Embassy
staff, Rabieh Haber, Director of Statistics Lebanon,
predicted that Murr and Sami Gemayel would be the only
winners from the Murr list in the Metn, with FPM and its
allies taking the remaining six seats, just as they did in
¶2005. We find it significant that Siniora asked Elias Murr
for information about the Defense Minister's meeting with
Asad, and suggests the suspicion Siniora may harbor about the
Murrs' political intentions.

¶8. (C) It is unclear if Murr really believes everything he
says, or is telling us what he thinks we might want to hear.
An experienced Lebanese political wheeler-dealer, Murr may
yet surprise us with the direction his campaign takes.
However, his public statement after the meeting with the
Ambassador, saying, "We were the victims of our alliance with
Michel Aoun," suggests he may have made up his mind for these
elections, despite hopes Aoun may have entertained (Ref B).
Nevertheless, that still leaves the question of what
direction MIchel Murr will take the day after the elections.
End comment.

SISON